



## Regional movements in Serbia – sources of conflict or solution?

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Although the democratization of Serbia is a key precondition for creating long-term security in the Western Balkans, progress has been far too slow since the ousting of the Milosevic regime. Recent social and political developments indicate that it will be difficult in the near future to maintain strong support for regionalism, minority rights and democratization. According to recent opinion polls, the Serbian Radical Party enjoys the highest popularity and Serbia responded with resentment to Montenegro's recent proclamation of independence. Moreover, as crucial decisions will be taken before the end of this year regarding the status of Kosovo, the political climate may well not be conducive to fostering pro-minority attitudes in Serbian society. No one knows what will be the response to Kosovo's eventual independence, yet, internal reaction in Serbia remains one of the most critical sources of insecurity for the region. As Kosovo moves towards independence, the Albanians in Southern Serbia will very likely remain a source of tension and potential conflict even if, at present, they seem unlikely to take up weapons to join Kosovo.

At this delicate time some ethnic minorities have articulated new demands including an increasing call for territorial solutions. The Albanians in Southern Serbia, for example, began to require decentralization and territorial autonomy similar to what Belgrade seeks for Kosovo Serbs. Amidst an escalation of inter-ethnic tensions in Vojvodina, the Hungarian minority once again put forward their proposal for greater autonomy including territorial autonomy. The incidents targeting ethnic minorities in Vojvodina raised concerns not only in neighboring Hungary, but prompted reactions from European institutions, such as the European Parliament. A third example is the Sandzak Muslims who, at the end of 2005, gave voice to their grievances. Three Bosniak parties issued a declaration claiming that their human and minority rights were being violated, and thus called for the creation of Sandzak region as a political-territorial unit.

Although minorities may be putting the issue of ethnic-territorial autonomy even more vocally, in light of the present political mood in Serbia, a positive reception and support for such demands is very unlikely. According to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia<sup>2</sup>, the minority issue has become marginalized with the result that it only gains international attention when it becomes a security issue. Despite this, grievances of ethnic minorities do remain a potential source of insecurity. As a result of discrimination during the Milosevic regime, ethnic minorities were under-represented in public institutions and in the management of those companies that were privatized. The integration of Albanians into state institutions such as the courts, the judiciary, postal services, tax authorities, land registry, local development agencies, etc. has been very slow or non-existent since the adoption of the Covic Plan in 2001. Among the various specific problems, the issue of education curricula can be mentioned, as minority syllabi do not tend to reflect the history and culture of minorities, but favor Serbian tradition and culture. Providing adequate institutional mechanisms to solve such problems and thus reduce ethnic tensions is a precondition for stability not only in Serbia but in the whole region.

The Serbian government is presently preparing a new constitution, and the issue of how to create regional structure for the country is one of the most contested topics. While creating new regions might provide an

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<sup>2</sup> Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, National Minorities

opportunity for ethnic gerrymandering by dividing the compact blocks of Hungarians in Vojvodina or of the Muslims in Sandzak, for example, decentralization through empowering local governments might turn out to be a better long lasting solution. The decentralization of Serbia through the delegation of more authority to municipalities could benefit minority groups, especially when the latter constitutes a local majority. This idea has been promoted also by the Council of Europe, which in a recommendation given in 2001 to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, connected decentralization to the situation of ethnic minorities. The recommendation stated that "broad decentralization will help respond to the legitimate expectations of the minorities in Vojvodina and Sandzak, and of the Bulgarian and Albanian minorities (Presevo Valley)." It further suggested "that the debate on regionalization in Serbia should also focus on the structures that might be proposed to the regions with large minorities."<sup>3</sup>

While admitting that meeting demands for minority rights requires more than simply decentralization, this may well be more than a simple and practical step in that direction for those minorities that are more numerous and live in concentrated areas. Furthermore, granting more substantial authority to local self-governments could pre-empt various current claims for territorial autonomy. Bestowing local governments with more autonomy may be welcomed by most municipalities, as most complain about the centralized nature of the state in Serbia. Raising the issue of decentralization with a focus on municipalities would also be politically less sensitive than pressing demands for more minority rights or the creation of ethnic regions. Decentralization can be an "ethnically blind" uniform measure. Finally, decentralization can be viewed as something desirable per se; it "will strengthen democracy, citizen participation and the quality of public services while generally contributing to national cohesion".<sup>4</sup> According to the evaluation of the Council of Europe, there is plenty of room for improvement for ensuring real autonomy for local-governments in Serbia, yet, this is not so much a matter of their legal status. Local authorities cannot be substantially reformed merely through new legal in theory many self-governments have wide powers, in practice, many of these powers are absent. Real responsibility should be transferred from the center to the local level, including not only legal powers, but also financial resources and administrative backing.

Whilst it would undoubtedly strengthen the power of municipalities, implement-ing genuine provincial self-government for Vojvodina was also recommended by the Council of Europe, which would be very welcome by ethnic minorities. Leaders of the Hungarian minority support Vojvodina's autonomy because – among other reasons – they see the province as a better guarantor of minority rights than the Serbian state.

However, probably the most important reason why empowering local governments would be favorable for minorities is that many of their grievances are related to everyday life-concerns. It is somewhat worrying that in Presevo during the 2004 local elections the most radical nationalist Ragmi Mustafa's Democratic Party of Albanians (PDSH) came out as strongest, also taking over the mayor's office in 2005. According to analysts,<sup>5</sup> this was a result of popular dissatisfaction with economic hardships (local officials estimate that unemployment is around 70 per cent) and the moderates' failure to achieve progress. In Bujanovac, the result of decades of discrimination is that over 90 per cent of those employed in the public sector are Serbs. Clearly, tackling people's everyday concerns would be crucial to gaining their loyalty for the Serbian state and to convince them to abandon the idea of creating Eastern Kosovo. Southern Serbia and Sandzak are the most economically depressed regions of Serbia, and unemployment is especially high among the young male population. The Law on Investment Planning in Serbia until 2010 does not mention a single major investment in Sandzak. If local authorities gained substantial fiscal autonomy – which they lack at the moment – they could possibly improve the quality of public services and could also counter-balance the ethnic bias of countrywide policies. In addition, having multi-ethnic local police forces could ease tensions not only in Southern Serbia but in Sandzak and Vojvodina as well, as such police bodies would probably more effectively respond to incidents committed against members belonging to ethnic minorities. Empowering local governments could be a way to find better solutions to such issues.

<sup>3</sup> Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Recommendation 104 (2001) on local and regional democracy in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group, Southern Serbia: In Kosovo's Shadow, Crisis Group Europe Briefing N.43., 27 June 2006.

While delegating more authority to the local level might improve local economic development and greater integration of minorities, some measures should also be adopted to foster local democracy. Recent experiences suggest that sometimes minorities discriminate against individuals belonging to the majority living in their midst as an actual minority. The last few years Serbs have started to leave Presevo and Bujanovac in growing numbers due to such perceived discrimination. Therefore, institutions and procedures should be put in place to raise the level of citizen initiative, foster consensus between ethnic communities and guarantee equal opportunities for and treatment of citizens regardless of ethnicity.

In April 2005, the EU began to negotiate a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Serbia and Montenegro. Until the EU upholds the prospect of future membership for Serbia, it has considerable leverage to push forward democratic reforms, among them decentralization. However, the stalling of the EU-constitution's ratification and the significantly reduced budget for the instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA) calls into question the EU's commitment to the region. Strengthening the EU's presence in Serbia and maintaining the prospect of membership is a key for the success of EU conditionality, and thus for democratic reforms to continue.

It is time for the EU to set a clear policy towards the ongoing disputes over the territorial organization of Serbia. The EU Commission has not addressed these problems at all so far. It can be argued that finding the right answer to these challenges is of similar importance for Europe's future security, to that of pressing Serbia to cooperate with the Hague Tribunal. The need to adopt a strong and appropriate EU policy on this matter is urgent, as Serbia is at this very moment drafting a new constitution.